



# Ghana's Sakawa Superstition – Magic in the Digital Age

## The Background

Internet fraud is popularly known as Sakawa in Ghana. There is the belief that it can be achieved by supernatural means. It is this that I wish to explore.

The word sakawa probably comes from the Hausa “*sakàa*” = to put ; the verbal noun “*sakàa-waa*” means put-ting. I'm not clear how this word came to be used for internet fraud.

Traditionally, there is a belief that everything happens for a reason. Accumulating wealth (read selfishness), having a disability, anything that upsets the natural order, must have a supernatural reason.

*Sika aduro* and *Mogya sika aduro* (literally, blood money medicine) are two phrases expressing the belief that it's possible to gain riches through magic. This belief has now transferred itself into the 21st century into the technological arena. After making a pal on the internet, it is believed you can spiritually compel that person to concede to your requests for money.

## How to magic up money

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A traditional (fetish) priest is, apparently, able to channel supernatural powers through the enactment of various rituals. Magic needs some form of sacrifice and the size of the sacrifice determines the size of the financial reward.

Some magic rituals are relatively harmless such as sacrificing chickens or wandering about naked in the mornings, but the belief that blood can make the magic more powerful is dangerous as it can encourage ritual murder or the harvesting of human body parts. A popular belief, depicted in films, is where a group of friends sleep in coffins at the priest's house knowing that one person will be dead when the coffins are opened. One life is sacrificed so that the others can be rich.

There are outward signs used as evidence that someone has made a personal sacrifice. It could be a barren woman, a wound that never heals (as in diabetes), a disability or death of one of your children. You may also be given a snake that hides under your bed and vomits money in the dark of night in return for a strict feeding schedule.

If someone loses money quickly or crashes a newly acquired car then these are seen as signs that the gods have taken their payback.

### **The Skeptics View**

It must be becoming blatantly obvious what is going on here. It reads as a catalogue of misunderstandings about the causes of disability and illness and the inability to accept that seemingly random events occur like sudden death and car crashes.

Jealousy and resentment surely play a role particularly when someone, especially a young someone, appears to be gaining wealth which they "don't deserve".

### **The Psychology of Deceit**

Putting aside the professional scammers who are highly skilled at winning trust, Europeans are

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unused to the type of lies told by the amateurs. That someone, who you believe is a friend and that flatters you in a way you've not come across before, could fabricate they're an orphan or their sister is dying, is unconceivable. Truth telling is more hard-wired into those cultures and these lies are too expensive to contemplate. Pity has been developed into an art and can be switched on to inflict pain on their internet 'pal'. Cultural differences make the deceit easier.

### The Role of White Guilt

Many Europeans feel guilt about colonialism, especially the educated middle-classes. They want to personally do something that will alleviate their feelings and to make amends. These are the ones that send fees for school, hospital bills, rent and so on. They feel they are smart enough to spot a lie but they are unaware what they are up against with the superior acting skills of the scammers!

The TV images from organisations such as Oxfam contribute to the desire to help. It seems so simple with their "£xxx a month can feed a child" message.

Interestingly, colonialism is also used as a justification by the scammers who believe that lining their own greedy pockets somehow compensates their nation. My advice – if you're serious join an anti-colonial movement!

### Questions

Does all this money that is appearing (and disappearing) supernaturally contribute to an unstable economy? Perhaps the government should forget the economists and focus on the spiritualists!

Are the local gods really world travellers? In order to influence someone sitting behind a computer in the USA, their sphere of control would need to extend outside of Ghana to people who didn't even know they existed. Can they just magic themselves there like in the film Jumpers?

### Conclusion

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Criminals who defraud – perhaps surprised at their own luck – may well attribute it to the supernatural. A recent [survey](#) of boys in the internet cafes makes clear that most people do not have any success. It is like the American Dream – the success of a few individuals creates the illusion that everyone can achieve. The traditional belief that fast money and flashy cars must be the result of magic ensures the stories persist and is reinforced by films, churches and gossip from friends, family and community. Because the seed that magic is possible already exists within the culture, no one questions the mechanism by which sakawa could happen.

Sakawa leads people down a dead-end path of false expectations which are rarely fulfilled. Its reputation for success is reinforced and strategically exaggerated by the testimonies of criminals or unconfirmed hearsay. From those for whom it failed we hear nothing.

Further Reading:

[The Sakawa Boys: Inside the Bizarre Criminal World of Ghana's Cyber-Juju Email Scam Gangs](#)

[Sakawa Boys: Hacking the Natural Mystic](#)

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1. *Anon*

"There is no smoke without fire", another one of the things the people say. There is nothing new under the sun.

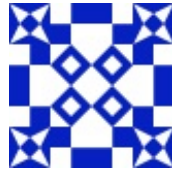
I do not think that the question is – or it should not be – whether or not magic/spiritualism exists. The history of 'your people' as well as 'mine' attest to and agree on the general premise of this.

Now then is Sakawa right? Ofcourse not! Was/is colonialism/neo-colonialism (in all its various shapes and guises) right? Ofcourse not! should people continue to oppress and exploit each other in these ways? Ofcourse not!

Seems to me that wrong only begets more and even worse wrongs. We are swimming...no drowning in it lately. We need more positivity in this world.

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*April 6, 2011 3:25 pm*



## 2. *Joseph Amoako-Attah*

Very well said. We do have some very smart people here whose energies can be better channelled towards a more positive end. And I particularly like the allusion to the American dream.

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April 6, 2011 5:16 pm



## 3. *md62i*

In America we have picpockets, people who steal your credit card we have corporations that steal billions. Africa has been raped of the descedents of 500 yrs of free labor that exeplifies the wealth the world see's. Can you imagine not paying for labor for genrations and then selling of the human being. These young men are only seeing what the results of lying and cheeting can amess wealth.

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April 7, 2011 10:07 pm



## **Graham Knight**

I think it's very easy to romanticise the situation, imagining young, subversive freedoms-fighters getting payback for the sins of the white's forefathers.

With your concerns about labour, also consider the waste of Ghana's human resources channelled into sakawa.

In Ghana, people are not so tolerant of criminal behaviour that

gives the country a bad name and has led to us being blocked from certain websites. Another result is that Ecommerce is not possible – something which could be a genuine source of income for the youth.

Most people do not make money. Instead the little money they get for food or travel is ‘invested’ into paying to get online. Their wasted time, sitting making contacts, could be used productively.

The myths, rumours, the belief in magic and a pretend anti-colonial justification, encourage the youth to waste their lives chasing empty dreams.

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*April 8, 2011 8:22 am*



#### 4. *Blackwell Sakawa*

This article was very enlightening. SAKAWA has been also applied by Ghanian women, who get European men to obtain visas to travel to Europe. It is good that information like this is spread, because many Europeans, and especially truthful Scandinavians, are not ready at all, for the almost endless fraud, lies and mislead by these individuals. To spread this information, can help prevent a tragedy happening in the lives of innocent European men, who sometimes lose everything to the Ghanian SAKAWA “black magic woman”. We all want to live and get rich, but the way some women treat their European men, all the cheating, lies

and financial misuse of the man, sometimes even a life-long paternity fraud, can cause great sufferings to innocent men in Europe. Contrary to common belief, it is not all European men who have colonized Africa. For example, Finland has never invaded a foreign country, or occupied an African nation. I live in Finland and SAKAWA tragedies happen here as well. Thank you very much for this informative article.

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November 22, 2011 **10:12 pm**

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